

# Partition Museum Project: Creating a refuge for the memories of Partition

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*India @ 70: LSE India Summit 2017 will feature an exhibition delivered in partnership with the Partition Museum Project. Here, **Arjun Bhatia** discusses how the Partition Museum in Amritsar was conceived to create a hub of artefacts, accounts and oral testimonies of the turbulent creation of independent India and the birth of Pakistan.*



The partition of British India in 1947 sparked off the largest mass migration in human history. It is estimated that over 14 million people were uprooted from their ancestral homes and rendered refugees as they moved to the supposed safety of religious majority in their respective new countries. Communal riots broke out on either side of the eastern as well as western borders. Arson, looting, and stabbings were prevalent. Over half a million men, women and children, were abducted, abused, or murdered, and thousands more went missing, never making it to any official count. The environment of suspicion and hostility between India and Pakistan created by the traumatic events surrounding the partition plague bilateral relations to this day.

From Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories such as *Toba Tek Singh*, Khushwant Singh's book *Train to Pakistan*, and Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight's Children* to Richard Attenborough's Academy Award winning feature film *Gandhi*, Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth*, and George Cukor's film adaptation of *Bhowani Junction*, the human cost of independence and partition has served as a central theme in many works of art. Yet nearly seven decades after the dreadful exodus, India had no museum, memorial or designated site commemorating the partition that gave birth to the two nations.

That was until The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust (TAACHT) initiated The Partition Museum Project. In October 2016, TAACHT established the world's first [Partition Museum](#) at Amritsar's Town Hall, which had stood witness to the clashes in Punjab after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 (when British General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on a crowd of peaceful protestors in a walled garden, killing hundreds in minutes). The museum is part of the city's recently inaugurated Heritage Street, which stretches from the Golden Temple to the Town Hall.

For many, the subject of the partition induces tears and stirs profound memories of lost loved ones, homes, and roots. But these accounts – barely chronicled, let alone documented – are themselves in need of refuge. The need to educate young people about the partition as the number of survivors that witnessed the colossal tragedy dwindles led to the conception of The Partition Museum Project. 'We are witnessing large scale migration even today where people go through the trauma of displacement. The stories are important... We need to document them for future generations,' says Lady Kishwar Desai, the Chair of The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust.

With that mission, the Trust worked towards the establishment of a world-class museum dedicated to preserving the memory of the partition – its victims, survivors and legacy. Through donations and contributions from public and private sources, the Partition Museum has built a collection of art, documents, artefacts, photographs, and oral histories that offer windows into the traumatic events of the period. Although it is still a work in progress, the team has already collected more than 2,000 historical objects and accounts from both sides of the border. Among the memorabilia is an iconic terracotta sculpture of a woman's head that for many has come to symbolise the pain inflicted on millions of lives by the partition. It was made by camp commander S.L. Parasher during his time at Ambala's Baldev Nagar refugee camp, using the earth of the camp itself.



The Partition Museum has been designed as a ‘people’s museum,’ exploring the pre- and post- partition era through stories which have – up until now – remained untold. ‘The museum will be a space of memory, healing and reconciliation. It will also memorialise the grit, courage and spirit of that generation,’ Desai had said on the occasion of the announcement of the museum’s site last year.

The Partition Museum Project is partnered by Hindustan Times, The Tuli Family, and The Teamwork Fine Arts Society. Strengthening its over 100-year-old relationship with India, the London School of Economics has also joined hands with the project. With its inter- and multi-disciplinary expertise, the LSE South Asia Centre serves as an academic advisor to the TAACHT, helping it organise academic conferences and seminars, curate exhibitions, and produce academic publications.

India @ 70: LSE India Summit 2017 will therefore feature an exhibition on ‘The Memories of Partition’ in Delhi, delivered in partnership with the Partition Museum Project. Through art, specially sourced objects, and anecdotes shared by survivors, the exhibition will capture the period when refugee camps spread across eastern, western, and northern India. It will showcase books, poetry, hand-written letters, documentaries from archives, films, and paintings that tell the tragic tale. ‘[The Partition] is part of our heritage... It is time to lift the veil of silence over [it],’ says Desai.

India @ 70: LSE India Summit, presented by [Apollo Tyres Ltd](#), takes place at the Habitat Centre in Delhi on 29-31 March 2017. Click [here](#) for more information about the conference, including a full conference schedule.

#### **About the Author**

**Arjun Bhatia** is a writer based in Delhi and is presently working on his debut novel. He has served as an Associate Editor at Inshorts, India's biggest mobile news company, and has written for the Jaipur Literature Festival and e-Fiction India magazine. He has also co-authored an anthology of short stories called Mango Chutney. He loves listening to audiobooks, holds stand-up comedians in high regard, and recommends that you watch *Before The Flood*, before it floods.



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